A Dozen Ways to Improve Your Walking Workouts

Of all the ways to stay fit, walking is the easiest, safest, and cheapest. It can also be the most fun: a fine day, a good companion, an attainable goal (such as a scenic spot) three or four miles away. On city streets, in the woods, or even round and round the high school track, walking is the best way to experience a landscape. If it's too rainy for anything but a treadmill indoors, at least you can read or watch TV. And after your workout, you know you've done yourself some good.

Briskly walking one mile (brisk usually means 3.5 to 4 miles per hour) burns nearly as many calories as running a mile at a moderate pace, and confers similar fitness and health benefits. Even strolling or slow walking (about 2 miles per hour) confers some benefits. This was seen in a new Harvard study of almost 40,000 female health professionals, which found that walking as little as an hour a week, at any pace, reduces the risk of coronary artery disease. Longer and more vigorous walking produced a greater risk reduction.

Here's how to get more out of your walking workouts and to vary your routine:

- Try to walk briskly for at least half an hour every day, or one hour four times a week. If you weigh 150 pounds, walking at 3.5 miles an hour on flat terrain burns about 300 calories per hour. So this schedule would burn about 1,100 calories a week (studies show that burning 1,000 to 2,000 calories a week in exercise helps protect against heart disease). If you can't work that into your schedule, try more frequent, shorter walks.
- •Make an effort to walk as much as possible. Skip elevators and escalators and take the stairs. Leave the car at home if you can walk the mile or two to a friend's house. Walk to work, at least part of the way.
- **Another approach:** get a pedometer and see how many steps you take a day. Aim for 3,000, and then try to work up to at least 5,000 steps (about 2.5 miles for the average stride) in the course of your daily activities. Some Japanese health officials advise 10,000 steps as a goal, though there is no magic number. To achieve the higher goals, you'll have to include some brisk exercise walking in addition to walking at home and at work.
- If you want to go faster, instead of taking longer steps, take faster steps. Lengthening your stride can increase strain on your feet and legs.
- **Swing your arms.** One good option: bend them at 90° and pump from the shoulder, like race walkers do. Swing them naturally, as if you're reaching for your wallet in your back pocket. On the swing forward, your wrist should be near the center of your chest. Move your arms in opposition to your legs—swing your right arm forward as you step forward with your left leg. Keep your wrists straight, your hands unclenched, and elbows close to your sides. The vigorous arm pumping allows for a quicker pace, and provides a good workout for your upper body. And you'll burn 5 to 10% more calories.
- Add some interval training. For example, speed up for a minute or two every five minutes. Or alternate one fast mile with two slower miles.
- Choose varied terrains. Walking on grass or gravel burns more calories than walking on a track. And walking on soft sand increases caloric expenditure by almost 50%, if you can keep up the pace.

- Walk up and down hills to build strength and stamina and burn more calories. Combine hill walking with your regular flat-terrain walking as a form of interval training. When walking uphill, lean forward slightly—it's easier on your leg muscles. Walking downhill can be harder on your body, especially the knees, than walking uphill, and may cause muscle soreness, so slow your pace, keep your knees slightly bent, and take shorter steps.
- Try a walking stick or poles. A walking stick is helpful for balance, especially for older people. To enhance your upper-body workout, use lightweight, rubber-tipped trekking poles, sold in many sporting-goods stores. This is like cross-country skiing without the skis. When you step forward with the left foot, the right arm with the pole comes forward and is planted on the ground, about even with the heel of the left foot. This works the muscles of your chest and arms as well as some abdominals, while reducing the stress on your knees. Find the right size poles by testing them in the store: you should be able to grip the pole and keep your forearm about level as you walk. Many poles are now adjustable.
- Use hand weights, but carefully. Hand weights can boost your caloric expenditure, but they may alter your arm swing and thus lead to muscle soreness or even injury. They're generally not recommended for people with high blood pressure or heart disease. If you want to use them, start with one-pound weights and increase the weight gradually. The weights shouldn't add up to more than 10% of your body weight. Ankle weights are not recommended, as they increase the chance of injury.
- Try backward walking for a change of pace. It is demanding, since it's a novel activity for most people. Even a slow pace (2 mph) provides fairly intense training. "Retro" walking is also a good option if you're trying to vary your workout on a treadmill or stair-climbing machine. And if you're recovering from a knee injury, it may help. Be careful when going back-wards outdoors: choose a smooth surface and keep far away from traffic, trees, potholes, and other exercisers. A deserted track is ideal. If possible, work out with a spotter, a forward-walking partner who can keep you from bumping into something and help pace you. To avoid muscle soreness, start slowly: don't try to walk backward more than a quarter mile the first week. Elderly exercisers or anyone else with balance problems should not retro walk.
- Choose the right shoes. Avoid stiff-soled shoes that don't bend. "Walking shoes" have flexible soles and stiff heel counters to prevent side-to-side motion. But for normal terrain, any comfortable, cushioned, lightweight, low-heeled shoes will do.